

DAILY BULLETIN

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CRITICAL U.N. REFORMS ACTIVELY BEING RESISTED, BOLTON SAYS

Lives depend on management reform, U.S. ambassador tells subcommittee

Washington -- Management reform at the United Nations might be a matter of life and death, but a large bloc of countries actively is opposing proposed changes, says U.S. Ambassador John Bolton.

Testifying at a House subcommittee hearing May 2, the United States' U.N. ambassador said in prepared remarks that the Oil-for-Food scandal is emblematic of what happens in U.N. programs when independent oversight, transparency and accountability are ignored.

Not only can waste and corruption occur, he said, but the critical services and humanitarian supplies meant for vulnerable populations are not delivered. The Oil-for-Food Program in Iraq was established to provide food and medicine for the Iraqi people by allowing Iraq to sell oil during U.N. sanctions. Instead, the program resulted in more than 2,000 companies paying kickbacks to Saddam Hussein's regime, which then diverted the \$1.8 billion it received to its own coffers.

"[W]hen we are discussing management reform, we are ultimately talking about people's lives," Bolton said.

Although the United States and about 30 other governments whose contributions provide more than 80 percent of the U.N. budget are supporting U.N. reform, Bolton said, a much larger group of countries actively is opposing reform.

Battle lines are being drawn, according to Bolton. The pro-reform group strongly supports many of the reform proposals called for by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. This group also wants to establish a mandatory process to review all U.N. mandates more than five years old.

"[T]here is no systemized process in place to review mandates that might be obsolete or ineffective, nor has there been one at all in the 60-year existence of the U.N.," he said.

But opposition is coming from the Group of 77 (G-77), which wants to exclude all mandates renewed by the U.N. General Assembly within the past five years from consideration, Bolton said. If successful, the G-77 position would exclude 75 percent of active mandates, hampering reform efforts significantly.

"Many member states have pet projects that they will defend -- projects which are wasteful and serve little to no purpose," he said in explanation of those who oppose reforms.

Related to the changes sought in management, Bolton said, are proposals dealing with the rules and regulations governing U.N. agencies and programs.

Earlier this spring, in laying out his program for reform, Annan said there was a need for deep and fundamental change "for a radical overhaul of the United Nations Secretariat." But the G-77 also is resisting efforts to streamline even managerial structures and practices, Bolton said.

"[W]e do not agree with every single reform proposed by the Secretary-General, but we certainly agree with his diagnosis of the problem," Bolton said. "Unfortunately, we have encountered not indifference or a lackadaisical attitude toward these reforms by the G-77 -- we have encountered outright resistance and hostility to any reform effort at all."

For this reason, Bolton said he is not optimistic about U.N. reform prospects.

Additional information about the G-77 is available on the group's Web site: <http://www.g77.org/>
For more information on U.S. policy, see United States and U.N. Reform:
http://usinfo.state.gov/is/international_security/UNGA_2005.html

NEW STUDIES NOTE DECLINE OF FREE MEDIA IN FORMER SOVIET UNION

Studies by press freedom groups mark World Press Freedom Day

By Jeffrey Thomas
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington -- Free media in a number of countries that once belonged to the former Soviet Union continue to decline, according to new studies released by press freedom groups to mark World Press Freedom Day May 3.

Turkmenistan President Saparmurat Niyazov personally approves the front-page content of the major dailies, and the Central Asian country's newscasters begin each broadcast with a pledge that their tongues will shrivel if their reports ever slander Turkmenistan, the flag or the president.

Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov has re-established a Soviet-style dictatorship that relies on "an informal system of state censorship," forcing foreign correspondents to leave the country and jailing Uzbek journalists, six of whom were in prison at the end of 2005.

Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko's administration has stopped independent newspapers from being printed and distributed, jailed journalists for attempting to cover opposition rallies, and criminalized criticizing the president or "discrediting Belarus abroad."

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus represent the worst of the worst in the former Soviet space, according to an analysis released May 2 by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which called state-sponsored censorship one of the most urgent threats facing journalists worldwide.

In compiling its "10 most-censored" list, CPJ used such criteria as state control of all media; the existence of formal censorship regulations; the use by the state of violence, imprisonment and harassment against journalists; jamming of foreign news broadcasts; and restrictions on private Internet access.

"People in these countries are virtually isolated from the rest of the world by authoritarian rulers who muzzle the media and keep a chokehold on information through restrictive laws, fear and intimidation," said CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper.

FREEDOM HOUSE STUDY

A major study released April 27 by the independent non-governmental organization Freedom House documents setbacks in press freedom in last year in a number of countries, including Russia, Uzbekistan and Belarus.

The study, "Freedom of the Press 2006: A Global Survey of Media Independence," also shows a longer-term pattern of decline in press freedom in the former Soviet Union.

The report noted improvements in press freedom in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, both of which are rated "partly free." The report rates Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia as "free."

Freedom House bases its classification of each country on the degree to which the free flow of news and information is permitted.

Turkmenistan once again was ranked among the five worst countries for press freedom – along with Burma, Cuba, Libya and North Korea. Press freedom conditions in Uzbekistan and Belarus put those two countries in the bottom ten. The study deemed an additional 62 countries "not free," including Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Concerning Russia, the study cited obstacles created by Russian President Vladimir Putin's government to prevent reporting on sensitive topics, as well as numerous cases of journalists being assaulted because they sought to report on corruption or protests against the government.

"Although the Russian constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, authorities were still able to use the judicial system to harass and prosecute journalists for independent reporting," according to the Freedom House report.

The report also says the Putin government exerts direct influence on media outlets and determines news content through state ownership or control of the country's three main national television networks -- Channel One, RTR and NTV.

But the Freedom House study is not without some good news, according to the group's Christopher Walker, director of studies, who described the report's highlights in an article for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Ukraine since the Orange Revolution of 2004 has significantly improved its media climate, Walker said. Although the country "still confronts the challenges that accompany oligarchic ownership structures," he said, its media "have achieved a degree of pluralism and independence that would have been unthinkable in the pre-Orange Revolution era."

"The significant yet incomplete progress in Ukraine should serve as a reminder that overcoming deeply entrenched Soviet-era habits and practices will be a trying, long-term effort for reform of the media, as well as for other key institutions that form the building blocks of democratic societies," according to Walker.

For additional information on journalism and press freedom, see World Press Freedom Day:

http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/rule_of_law/press_freedom.html

U.S. MEDICAL AGENCY FUNDS SUCCESSFUL BIRD FLU VACCINE TEST

New vaccine protected mice, ferrets against lethal H5N1 virus

Washington – A commercially developed vaccine funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health has protected mice and ferrets against a highly lethal avian influenza virus.

California company Vical Inc., developed the vaccine, and an investigator at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Tennessee led the study, according to a May 2 St. Jude press release.

The finding, coupled with results of previous studies that showed protection against multiple human influenza strains, suggests that such a vaccine would protect humans against multiple variants of the bird and human influenza viruses, said Richard Webby of St. Jude.

Such a vaccine could protect people against an H5N1 bird flu virus that mutates to adapt to humans, not just birds, and easily can spread from person to person, Webby said.

Flu experts and public health officials fear that such a variant of H5N1 would trigger a human pandemic.

The studies included 16 mice or six ferrets in each vaccine or control group, and the investigators used two versions of Vical's DNA-based vaccine in the studies.

One vaccine was directed against three viral proteins – NP, M2 and H5.

NP and M2 usually do not mutate quickly (they are “conserved”) and are slow to avoid immune responses that a vaccine triggers.

H5 is a mutating (“variable”) protein on the surface of the bird and human flu viruses that is critical to the viruses' ability to infect cells. The H5 protein easily mutates, so it can avoid immune responses triggered naturally or by a vaccine.

The other vaccine used in the study contained only the two conserved viral proteins, NP and M2.

All test DNA vaccines were formulated with the company's Vaxfectin™ adjuvant. An adjuvant is an additive administered with a vaccine that has little effect by itself, but improves the response of the immune system to the vaccine.

In the St. Jude study, the three-component vaccine (H5, NP, M2) protected the mice completely against potentially lethal challenges with a highly virulent H5N1 avian influenza virus.

Other studies showed that a version of the vaccine containing only the NP and M2 components provided significant protection against several strains of human influenza virus and the H5N1 bird flu strain.

“By stimulating immune responses against targets not likely to mutate,” he added, “the vaccine could trigger an immune defense against a broad range of variants of the virus.”

Even if the bird flu virus mutates to adapt to humans, Webby said, cross protection would let the immune system track and attack such an emerging new variant “without missing a beat.

“We wouldn't have to wait to start developing a vaccine against it until after the original virus mutated,” he added, which would have to be done now if bird flu adapted

to become transmissible between humans, the mutation that could lead to a human pandemic of disease.

Webby's team showed that all mice and ferrets that received the DNA vaccine survived the challenge with the virulent H5N1 strain; those that received a “blank” (placebo) vaccine did not survive.

The vaccine also prevented weight loss in all animals challenged with the virulent virus, suggesting that the vaccine might also protect humans against serious flu-related sickness. The DNA vaccines targeted NP and M2 – with and without the H5 avian influenza virus surface protein.

For additional information on efforts to combat avian influenza, see Bird Flu:

http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/bird_flu.html

U.S. OFFICIAL CALLS FOR GREATER OIL PRODUCTION, ALTERNATIVE FUELS

Energy secretary outlines steps to ensure global energy security

By David Shelby
Washington File Staff Writer

Washington – Oil-producing countries must increase their excess production capacity, and all nations must diversify their energy sources if the world is to achieve energy security, according to U.S. Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman.

Speaking to a Washington forum on U.S.-Saudi energy relations May 2, Bodman underscored the importance of all nations cooperating to reach this goal.

“Continued robust, global economic growth depends on secure, affordable supplies of energy,” he said. “This means that both developed and developing nations as well as oil producing and consuming nations must work together to ensure reliable supplies of affordable priced energy.”

He said the current dynamics of the oil market reveal a need to expand the global oil and gas infrastructure because the fear of supply disruptions is driving up prices.

“The market’s geopolitical concerns are framed in a context of limited excess global oil-production capacity,” he said. “Fearing for the continuity of supply, market participants try to protect themselves by seeking inventory, bidding up prices for available supply.”

He called this phenomenon the “fear premium” and said it is an important force in today’s oil market.

“The role of market psychology in price formation grows as the market tightens and becomes more volatile,” he said.

He said that Saudi Arabia, as the world’s only oil producer with significant spare capacity, and the United States, with the world’s largest strategic petroleum reserve, should work together to ensure continuity in the world oil supply.

He said that through close collaboration, the two countries managed to mitigate the effects of a serious oil supply disruption following an active 2005 hurricane season that shut down several drilling and refining facilities in the Gulf of Mexico. (See related article.)

“No one wishes to interfere in the efficient functioning of the world oil market,” he said. “However during times of supply loss, by working together, we can supplement the market’s own response by cooperating to add supply to make up for that which has been lost.”

Bodman said the other element of a global plan for energy security should be the diversification of energy portfolios to include more alternative and renewable energy sources.

“Diversity is good for both consuming and producing nations,” he said. “It inherently improves energy security by reducing dependence on any one type of energy. It reduces pressure on traditional energy markets, and it is good for the environment by increasing sustainability of the world’s natural resources as well as reducing emissions.”

Bodman also highlighted President Bush’s four-point plan to confront rising gasoline prices in the United States. This includes ensuring that market participants are behaving fairly, promoting greater fuel efficiency, boosting the U.S. oil and gasoline supplies and promoting the use of alternative fuels.

For additional information, see Energy Policy:
http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/energy_policy.html

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